THE WORDS OF COVID-19: Bulgaria

war
(война)

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Abstract:

Български език:

Ключовата дума "война" представя употребата на военните метафори и ролята на милитаризацията на дискурса по време на първата вълна на пандемията, причинена от разпространението на COVID-19. Езиковите и мултимодалните употреби, свързани с военния дискурс, са разгледани от гледна точка на дискурс анализа.

English:

The keyword "war" presents the usage of war metaphors and the role of the so-called militarisation of the discourse at the time of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The linguistic and multimodal uses connected to the military discourse are discussed with the help of the CDA.

Etymology:

The word 'война' (war) is of Indo-European origin and it is used in Slavic languages. According to Bulgarian etymological dictionary it means: "*въоръжена борба между държави; войска*; от и.е. *wei- *woi- 'гоня', ловя' " (*armed struggle between states; army;* comes from Indo-European *wei- *woi- 'chase', 'catch').

According to Anikin (ed.) the Slavic word comes from: прасл. *vojьna ‘война’, субстантивир. прил. ж. р. […], произв. с суфф. -ьna от *vojь ‘бой’, ‘войско’, ‘воин’ (Proto-Slavic *vojьna ‘war’, nominalised adjective, derivative with the suffix -ьna from *vojь ‘fight’, ‘army’, ‘warrior’).

Except for its historical meaning, the contemporary Dictionary of Bulgarian language (Речник на българския език) mentions some connotative meanings of the word: (*Прен. Разг.* Остър конфликт, безкомпромисна борба между отделни лица или групи.; 3. *Прен.* Активна и безкомпромисна борба за премахване или унищожаване на нещо, i.e. acute conflict, an uncompromising struggle between individuals or groups; an active and uncompromising struggle to remove or destroy something.).

The connotative, metaphorical meanings have gained a lot of popularity, and nowadays they are much more used than the denotative one.

Lakoff and Johnson mention in their famous book "Metaphors We Live By" some examples of such 'war' metaphors: 'Argument is war'; 'Love is war', etc. The so-called “militarisation” of metaphors according to V. Koller is connected to many other target domains – her research reveals that even in the media discourse of marketing and sales “the WAR metaphor is the most frequent one in the corpus” (Koller, 2004, p. 64). War metaphors are also used in other spheres, for example, in medicine as Susan Sontag showed in her book “Illness as metaphor”. As Flusberg, Matlock & Thibodeau (2018, p. 1) conclude “war metaphors are ubiquitous in discussions of everything from *political campaigns* to *battles with cancer* to *wars* against crime, drugs, poverty, and even salad”!

In recent times, the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis has also been verbalised with the help of war metaphors. They are used in the anti-virus action framing in many countries (Maesse, 2020, p. 2). Even UN chief Antonio Guterres declared on 23.03.2020 that “[t]he fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war”.

Cultural specificity:

It seems that war-related metaphors are used almost everywhere, perhaps because of globalisation processes. The politicians in most of the countries prefered them, especially at the time of the "first wave" at the beginning of 2020. Thibodeau's new research, presented at RaAM 14 Conference in Vilnius (2021) shows that politicians are more likely to use war-related metaphors when talking about COVID-19. The former US President Trump uses it in his speeches (Bates, 2020: 11). The Spanish Chief of Defence Staff, General Miguel Ángel Villaroya said: “I must congratulate every Spanish citizen for the discipline that they are showing. All Spanish citizens are behaving like soldiers at this difficult time. In this irregular and strange war that we are living or fighting in, every one of us is a soldier”.

A. Musolf (2020) mentions the UK prime minister Boris Johnson's *war announcement*. However, he takes into account the difference between British and German public discourse, resulting in differences in groups using war metaphors: "in both national cultures, the field of war/fighting-based metaphors did by no means remain the same over the course of 2020 but developed into divergent discourse-historical trajectories".

In Bulgaria the war rhetoric is used also metaphorically, for example the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov states: “Това е бактериологична война. В началото всички го подценяваха. Вчерашният ден беше като бомба – с изявления на всички лидери по света. Усещането на хората и извънредните мерки носят големи поражения. Нито една държава не е приложила нито една мярка повече от нас, не е направила нещо, което не сме направили ние.” (“This is a bacteriological war. In the beginning, everyone underestimated it. Yesterday was like a bomb - with statements from all the leaders in the world. People's perception and emergency measures are very damaging. No country has implemented any measures more than us, no country has done anything that we have not done.”)(13.03.2020) and "Ние сме във война с невидим враг" (“We are in a war with an invisible enemy”)(17.03.2020). Ivan Geshev, the Prosecutor General also used such a metaphor: "Трябва да преминем в режим на почти **военно положение**" (“We should go into a state of almost **martial law**”) (17.03.2020).

According to the Prime Minister, the "enemy" is not only the virus, but also “недисциплинираните хора, които разнасят заразата” (“the undisciplined people who spread the infection”) (13.03.2020). In this difficult situation, some politicians blame "the Others" - foreigners, migrants, etc. for the coronavirus spread (for example, Orban in Hungary, Trump in the USA, etc.). In Bulgaria, at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the Roma quarters were closed and the checkpoints were set up. These measures were supported by the nationalist party IMRO, which was a part of the Governing Coalition, although the Roma quarters weren't "a hearth" of the virus spread.

The militarisation of the discourse is presented even via the choice of the members of the National Operational Headquarters. The participants of this structure are two military doctors, three senior officials of the Ministry of Interior and two other doctors.

The face of "the fight" against the virus became the Chair of the Headquarters Major General Prof. Dr. Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, a Director of the Bulgarian Military Medical Academy. In most of the public appearances of Prof. Mutafchyiski (who became publicly popular as “The General”, usually positively connoted), he wore his military uniform. He became a metonymy of the measures and he is the main character of many memes. There are plenty of them and usually, the words of the General are “You don’t” or “You can’t”.



Prof. Mutafchyiski in uniform speaks in Parliament. Picture by BGNES.



A meme with Prof. Mutafchyiski and the Chairperson of the Parliament

Problematization:

War metaphors may be useful in some cases as they may mobilise people in difficult situations. They help people understand the seriousness of some situations, they may provoke solidarity and responsibility in actions, etc. (Olza et

al, 2020). However, they are not really appropriate during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, as there are more differences than similarities between the war and the pandemic. For example, people are not real active fighters or soldiers, they have to stay calm and distant to protect others. Elena Semino (2021) mentions the concerns (involved in the use of this metaphor by stating) that "War metaphors may legitimize authoritarian measures that could in fact be disproportionate, and that could go well beyond the specific response to the pandemic. Indeed, the establishment of martial law and or warlike powers for the executive in different countries reveals the potentially fuzzy boundary between the literal and metaphorical status of military references during the pandemic."

This is the reason why some researchers have started an initiative of collecting alternative metaphors in a big volunteer project, #ReframeCovid, in which contributors collect a large number of non-war metaphors taken from different languages.

More about the war metaphors and their use especially in Italy may be read here.

Communication strategies:

As has been said, war metaphors are used as a persuasive device for many purposes, for example:

1. They may successfully mobilise people in difficult times and may be very useful when the speed actions should be done.

2. They may be used by politicians to excuse some unpopular or unexpected measures.

3. They sound powerful and, by using them, people might look or feel braver and stronger.

Subversion:

As the pandemic continues to influence the lives of all people around the world, it is a source of inspiration both for artists and for ordinary people. War metaphors are now used even in unexpected genres as medical academic articles on COVID-19, but more often they are used in memes, illustrations, and other pieces of art. In these cases, the medical specialists are seen as soldiers, as new heroes.



ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

As noted above, war metaphors may be useful for short-term use because they mobilise and help people take the threat seriously. Therefore their use during the so-called first wave of the pandemic was somehow reasonable, as the fast coming "end of the war" in spring of 2020 seemed possible. People hoped some kind of "truce" with the virus could be found, and it would disappear soon. Culturally, Balkan people find the social meetings and the physical closeness between relatives and friends a very important part of their life, and in April 2020 the cover of Goran Bregovic's famous song "Bella Ciao" was made by North Macedonian singers. The title of the song was changed to "Korona ciao", and it became very popular in the Balkans, including in Bulgaria:



Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KK8zXgRCntU

Discussion:

What do you think about war metaphors? Are they appropriate for all cases or contexts?

Are war metaphors similar in some way to the pandemic?

Do you use war metaphors?

To what extent can Covid-19 war metaphors used in the media affect an audience?

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